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Title: Fuels for thought

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Lead:

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Lawmakers, agriculture and energy-industry executives brainstormed yesterday, seeking to take renewable fuels like biodiesel, ethanol and coal-based petroleum beyond promising curiosities and into Kentucky's mainstream.

"We're trying to push this along a little faster than what we're doing," said state Sen. Joey Pendleton, D-Hopkinsville.

High gasoline prices and supply interruptions from natural disasters and foreign political turmoil have created the best climate in decades for such a push, many of the 50 people who attended the Kentucky Renewable Fuel Summit said yesterday.

The meeting attracted "just about everyone in the state with an interest in renewable fuels" to help assemble legislation, said state Sen. Denise Harper Angel, D-Louisville.

"The goal, of course, is to become less dependent on foreign oil," she said.

A bill making its way through the General Assembly, sponsored by House Majority Floor Leader Rocky Adkins, D-Sandy Hook, would direct the Kentucky Office of Energy Policy to develop a strategy for the production of alternative transportation fuels.

That includes the conversion of coal to liquids using the Fischer-Tropsch process employed by Germany during World War II.

Renewable fuels could be a boon for Kentucky farmers as well.

Ethanol is produced primarily from corn, and biodiesel comes from fat and vegetable oil. The crops are domestically produced, and the fuels burn cleaner than conventional gasoline. And they sometimes cost less.

Bringing such fuels to Kentucky on the retail, production and distribution levels would

provide a market for tobacco alternatives such as corn and soybeans, Harper Angel said.

Another goal of the summit, held at the Frankfort Convention Center, was to begin formulating a standard for biodiesel that could be tested and distributed.

But the obstacles facing renewable fuels are as formidable as ever.

Automakers have been slow to make vehicles that run on E85, an 85 percent ethanol-15 percent gasoline mixture, and consumers have resisted entrusting their vehicles to fuel products many do not understand.

Also, E85 generally delivers fewer miles per gallon than gasoline.

"A lot of it is cultural," Pendleton said. "But when we look at clean air ... the biodiesel is by far the best for the environment. When oil is \$60-plus a barrel, this makes biodiesel and ethanol very, very affordable."

While Kentucky lags behind upper Midwest states in pursuing renewable fuels, they do have a foothold in the state.

The Commonwealth Agri-Energy facility in Hopkinsville produces fuel ethanol, and 10 percent ethanol gasoline, or E10, is sold at some retailers across the state -- and in Louisville and Northern Kentucky under terms of the Clean Air Act.

Pendleton said school buses in Christian County and other counties run on biodiesel.

And in Western Kentucky, a small but growing number of biodiesel and ethanol facilities are clustering along highways.

"We're building a 50 million-gallon-per-year biodiesel plant," said John Wright, vice president at Owensboro Grain. "We'll be located on the Ohio River, and we'll be using virgin soybean oil as a feed stock."

The plant is scheduled to open early next year.

Wright, who attended the summit, said his company feels now is the right time for such a move.

Government tax credits are creating incentives for biodiesel, and uncertainties with oil supplies are helping too, he said.

"Biofuels isn't going to replace petroleum distillate, but it is going to find its way into the marketplace, and government has accepted and has adopted bioenergy and biofuels as part of agriculture policy as well," Wright said.

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